

ON SECRET SERVICE

By John Mowbray

The Ninth Envelope

CHAPTER 1

Bright Youth Wanted

SIR RICHARD WAKELING had been speaking in guarded tones. Now, after a pause to eye his companion inquiringly, he said, "So, then, David, I hope you quite understand that in this case I am proceeding upon conjecture. But my experience as Head of the Secret Service has shown me that even a surmise should not be neglected. Off you go now."

David went on his way in high spirits. He was making good, he believed, in the Secret Service. He liked the work; he liked its spice of dangerous adventure. But, above all, he was proud of serving his country, as so many of his family had served it before him.

Approaching his destination, a new block of flats, he scanned for the last time a scrap of paper Sir Richard had given him. It was a newspaper advertisement:

WANTED, bright youth of good education to read to an old gentleman four hours daily. Apply F. Goodman, 163a Bonivard Mansions, W.1.

Very good, here he was on the steps of Bonivard Mansions, and somewhere (high up, it sounded) in these towering buildings was the old gentleman who wanted a bright youth to read to him. He hoped he'd prove bright enough—in more ways than one!

The lift passed floor after floor before its attendant stopped at a small landing with one door on the right and one on the left.

There were only two flats up here, then. Nice and quiet, thought David, who before proceeding took a look at both doors. On the one he was seeking he saw no signs of a name-plate. The other which faced it, 163b, was tenanted, he perceived, by a Mr Felix Tournier.

Well, he didn't want Felix Tournier, he wanted F. Goodman, so he stepped back and pressed the bell of 163a. However, he had to ring three times before the door was opened by a man with a grave, fallow face, who took a long look at him, then demanded his business, and, when David had stated it, told him to wait for a minute while he ascertained whether Mr Goodman could see him.

The fellow was gone for some minutes. When he returned he beckoned to David, and, bidding him to tread softly, took him down a short passage to a large room so dimly lighted that at first he thought it was empty and stood waiting for his companion to draw back the curtains.

But next he heard the fellow's voice at his ear. "Mr Goodman, the young gentleman," it announced. Then another voice came from the shadows, a thin, querulous voice which uttered "Come in, lad!" And David made out a bent figure in an armchair.

"You may bring me my spectacles, Parker," the thin voice said next. "Then light the reading-lamp and set it down by the lad."

A rum set out, thought David, holding his peace till the manservant had complied with his master's requirements. Then he saw that the old gentleman was wearing a dressing-gown, that his hair was white as silver above sunken cheeks, and that the hand with which he had taken the spectacles was shaking.

The soft-footed servant slipped out. "I am a sad invalid, my lad: a very sad invalid," Mr Goodman continued, while David stood straight and alert. "There are two things I cannot abide: a noise and a bright light. My eyesight fails. So I have to employ other eyes."

"Yes, I understand, sir," David responded.

"Well, now, Your name, please?"

"It's David, sir. David Renwick."

"Where were you educated?"

"At a private school, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen, sir."

"Ah! A nice age. And can you read aloud very clearly but quietly?"

"I think so, sir."

"Well, there's a book on the table beside you. Sit down and open it and read till I tell you to stop." Thus saying, the invalid leaned forward in his chair, with his hands supported on the crook of a stick, and his eyes behind their heavy glasses on David.

"Read slowly, clearly, and quietly."

The book was a work on ancient Egypt, dry and abstruse, but, by taking it steadily, David managed quite well, with nothing worse than an occasional stumble over some long defunct Pharaoh's name.

"Yes, I think you will do, Renwick. So now I can explain to you further. I am engaged on a book of my own which was well under way when I was overtaken by this affliction of failing eyesight. I can see to make notes, but I can no longer read much printed matter, so you shall be my eyes and read out to me, while I memorise and make a note now and then. Between us we shall get on famously, eh?"

CHAPTER 2

The Flat Opposite

ANY stranger coming upon David and his employer at work must have deemed it a strange sight.

There at the big table sat David, a reading-lamp beside him, his book propped in front of him. And beyond the radius of the green-shaded lamp, at the farther end of the dim room, sat his employer, huddled up in his chair with his head on one side, hand to ear, bending every now and then to jot down a note on a writing-pad.

The unopened windows were covered with muslin curtains which, complaining that the strong light made his eyes smart, the old gentleman could rarely endure to have drawn. And when occasionally he removed his dark spectacles to wipe them with a silk handkerchief, he would close his eyes, having first told David to pause.

At other times, when Parker brought in his morning cup of warm milk, he would break off while he was sipping it to chat.

The work he was engaged upon, he repeated, would make his name live long after he'd gone. What Gibbon had done for the Roman Empire, he said, that he was doing for the dynasties of ancient Egypt. "If my health is spared me, or what remains of it," he would sigh.

David said: "And do you actually remember all that I read, sir?"

"I do, indeed. All my life I have trained my memory. I advise you to do the same. There is nothing more valuable than a memory which registers automatically."

David marvelled. "Yet you do have to take notes!" he uttered.

"I take notes, yes. For amplification, dear boy. And presently I shall put these up for my printer."

"So your work is being printed already, sir!" David exclaimed.

The dulled eyes behind the thick spectacles dwelt on his face. The hunched

figure stirred. "Yes, already," the thin voice responded, "my work is going bit by bit to the press. For life is short. I must get it in print ere my strength fails. And also let me confide in you: I need the money. I am a poor man. I have sacrificed all to my life's work. So my printer, who will also publish the book, will remit to me as I furnish him with each part. I have nearly finished Part I." Then a quivering hand set down the cup. "Come! Back to our labours!"

Then off started David again. But presently, glancing up on a sudden, he surprised those guarded eyes still searching his face and received the impression that the old gentleman had not been listening.

It was on the fifth day that as soon as he put in his appearance his employer gave him an envelope for the printers.

"There you are, my dear lad! My notes up to date," he said cheerfully. "Do you know East Commercial Street? If not, you'll soon find it. Halfway down you'll see my printers, Vibond and Co. Go there and ask for Mr Vibond, and give him this envelope: see, it's marked Number Three."

"Do I tell him what to do, sir?"

"Vibond knows, my dear lad. He will set the manuscript up in type. Then I amplify. Be off now. And mind you bring me his receipt."

"A receipt, sir?"

"Yes, of course. My manuscript's valuable, very valuable."

So David went off with the envelope in his pocket, rather wondering how the men at Vibond's machines could decipher and set up his employer's crabbed writing. He found East Commercial Street, though it took him some time; it was more than an hour, at least, before his return. When he went into the darkened room Mr Goodman seemed fretful.

"Did you see Mr Vibond himself?"

"Yes, and here's his receipt, sir," said David, producing the document.

"You explained to Mr Vibond that you were my secretary?"

"Your amanuensis, I said, sir," David rejoined.

"My amanuensis! That's good!" The old gentleman chuckled, then smiled queerly, like one who is smiling to himself.

It was on the following morning that, arriving before his time, David glimpsed the back of a straight-standing, raven-haired man who was letting himself into the other flat on the landing. When he himself had rung and been admitted by Parker he mentioned this to the latter, with the remark that he'd never seen anyone entering that flat before.

"Or coming out of it either," he added. "It belongs to a Mr Tournier, doesn't it, Parker?"

Parker nodded, and drew David quickly inside. But he halted him on the other side of the door.

"Mr Tournier is a foreign gent, sir," he replied, "who spends most of his time at Monte Carlo and such places. I can't say I holds with foreigners much myself."

David laughed at this. "Oh, you don't like foreigners," he said. "So Mr Tournier darts back now and then, does he?"

"Just occasionally. He'll be here for a day and then off again. A bird of passage, I call him. Well, I can't take you in to the master for a while, sir, for I'm sorry to say he's had a very bad night. So he isn't out of his bed yet."

"Then perhaps he'd rather not work this morning?"

"I'll ascertain, sir. Will you wait here while I'm gone, sir?" So Parker went, leaving David standing in the passage, to return in four or five minutes shaking his head. "The master's compliments, sir, and he'll be much obliged if you'll return tomorrow. He can't work today."

Parker opened the door, crossed the landing, rang for the lift, and stood watching till it had carried David away. Then his grave face relaxed, and he smiled the same secretive smile as his master had smiled when he termed David his amanuensis.

Though another batch of notes was soon ready for the printers, Mr Goodman began to manifest signs of impatience. He would snap at David testily now and then, to apologise later on in his tremulous accents. "When you are as old as I am, my dear lad—" he would utter, and there break off to sigh heavily with exhaustion.

And thus they worked on, while David's pile of books mounted and the soft-footed Parker passed in and out like a shadow.

It was toward the end of his second week in this strange job that David, who had begun to wonder how long it would last, had a rather unexpected encounter with Parker. He had taken another envelope to the printers and was returning with the receipt when he thought that he'd walk up the stairs instead of using the noisy lift.

So up the stairs he climbed, in no hurry at all, going quietly and pausing now and again to reflect that the higher you went the smaller the landings became, and how much more ornamental the doors lower down were than those of the flats at the top. Then, as he walked up and up and met no one descending, he was more than ever struck by the quietness all around him. Mr Goodman could hardly have found a place where he was likely to be less disturbed—if only the lift hadn't whined and clanked as it did, telling everyone in the building that someone was coming!

Which in certain circumstances, as David grimly reflected, might cause that lift to play its part very usefully! Suppose, for instance, that one were dodging unwelcome visitors. Then the lift gave you notice. You had time to be "not at home," time to shoot the bolt in your door and leave them to ring, and ring, and go on ringing without answer.

But here he was at the top, and had paused to take breath when he noticed the door of Tournier's flat just ajar. He stood still and listened; then, hearing a faint noise inside, he pricked his ears up afresh and listened more keenly.

Yes, somebody was moving inside that flat. But Felix Tournier was away on the Continent, as Parker had informed him only this morning.

So who could it be? A daylight thief? Hardly likely. It was more likely that the janitor with his master-key had slipped inside to see to something or other.

David's curiosity quickened. On tiptoe he stepped to the door, and, pushing it farther open, put his head round. There was nobody in the passage. He went down it quietly, and distinguished that the movements came from the kitchen.

"Now for it!" he muttered. And into the kitchen he marched.

A man was bending over something on the gas-stove. But he jerked his head round as David came in, then, smothering an exclamation of anger, he straightened himself and put his hands on his hips. Thus standing, he demanded, "What do you want, sir?"

It was Parker the manservant, his fallow face grave as ever. Yet David could have vowed that at the first moment the fellow's eyes had flickered with startled unpleasantness. And now did David assume that most juvenile expression wherewith he could always mask himself when he pleased. He said, smiling, "Why, I heard a noise as I passed and I thought someone must have broken in. What's the matter?"

TO BE CONTINUED

A SHOCK FOR TWO

JACKO had been to the circus and was tremendously impressed by the trapeze act. He had gone on talking till the family were tired of hearing about it.

On Saturday morning Mother Jacko was bustling about in the kitchen, and Jacko was hindering her all the time by swinging on the door handles and

He dashed up to the swing, and in a twinkling was soaring merrily upwards. He was enjoying himself!

There was only a low fence dividing the Jackos' house from next door, and he could see Miss Ape busily hanging out her washing! She had a huge laundry basket on the grass from which she was taking the articles of clothing.



He shot right into the basket!

reaching up to the ledge on the scullery door to see if he could dangle from it by one hand.

"Do go and amuse yourself in the garden," she cried at last. "I shall never have dinner ready."

Jacko played aimlessly with his cricket ball for a little while, and then he sighted baby's swing. It was hanging from an apple-tree—quite near the ground and easy to get on to. Cool! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Higher and higher went Jacko, whistling loudly.

He shifted his position slightly, and very cautiously raised one leg in the air in imitation of the trapeze artist at the circus.

He felt very proud. He'd show Miss Ape how clever he was! He was just going to call to her when his hands slipped from the rope, and before he could stop himself he had shot over the fence right into her basket of washing!